

Ukraine moves closer to future in NATO

By Taras Kuzio,
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Ukraine obtained its second "civilian" defense minister with the appointment in late June of Yevhen Marchuk, who had been secretary of the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) for the previous four years. Valery Shmarov, the first experiment at introducing a civilian defense minister in the mid 1990s, is now seen to have been a failure.

What has changed in the meantime and why now? Marchuk's appointment is likely to be more successful because the armed forces have changed in the last decade and because Ukraine now has a clear goal of NATO membership. The two issues are linked. Ukraine's armed forces are now more willing to accept a civilian Defense Minister because they have become more pro-Western and pro-NATO. The hostility toward the United States and NATO that dominates the Russian military is largely absent in the Ukrainian military. Marchuk was instrumental in pushing for the May 2002 decision by the NSDC to openly declare the goal of NATO membership.

Successful partnership

Since joining NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) in February 1994, Ukraine has been the most active CIS state in the organization. Ukraine has participated in 200 PfP exercises and hosts the NATO PfP training centre at the former Yavoriv military base in western Ukraine, where large scale PfP exercises are held annually.

During Kuchma's first term in office, Ukraine successfully used the "NATO card" to obtain Western backing for its independence and territorial integrity in the face of a hostile Russia. During the second half of the 1990s, Ukraine became the third largest recipient of U.S. assistance and the largest country with which the United Kingdom had a bilateral military relationship. A strong bilateral military relationship also developed with the United States through the "In the Spirit of PfP" program.

The benefits of the NATO-Ukraine relationship are seen in the transformation of the country's military officer corps into a pro-NATO institution. The NATO-Ukraine Joint Working Group on Defense Reform has assisted in improving transparency in the military budget and other reforms in the military and border troops. NATO assistance has also been invaluable in the radical reduction in Ukraine's armed forces from 780,000 inherited from the former USSR to 295,000 in 2003, a figure which is to be halved to 150,000 by 2010.

Like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense backs the country's "European choice" beyond mere rhetoric. The driving force behind the open declaration of seeking membership was the NSDC under Marchuk, which also

campaigns successfully for sending peacekeeping troops to Iraq. The Presidential Administration is more divided in its attitudes towards NATO.

Ukraine's 2,000 troops will be the fourth largest contingent in Iraq. Based in the Polish sector, they can build upon many years of cooperation in the Ukrainian-Polish Peacekeeping battalion (Ukrpolbat) promoted by NATO and the United States. Ukrpolbat has been based in Kosovo since July 2000 as part of KFOR.

NATO has developed cooperation with the military, the Ministry of Emergency Situations and border troops. Cooperation with non-military security forces, such as the Security Service and Ministry of Interior, is less developed and NATO should pay more attention to them on issues of democratic control and reform.

Toward the goal of membership

Under two pro-Western foreign ministers, Henady Udovenko and Borys Tarasyuk, from 1994-2000, Ukraine talked only vaguely of "Euro-Atlantic" integration. It was not until May 2002 that Ukraine formally announced its intention of seeking NATO membership.

Discussion of Ukraine's membership of NATO still remains hypothetical. The same was true, however, of the Baltic States until only a few years before they were invited to join NATO at the November 2002 Prague summit. It is most likely that Albania, Croatia and Macedonia will be invited to join at the 2007 NATO summit. The question for Ukraine is if it will be invited at the same time as these three states or at the following NATO summit in 2012. The issue of NATO membership is therefore no longer theoretical, but a matter of when.

The seriousness with which NATO treats Ukraine's membership aspirations could be seen at the high-powered conference held at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington in May 2003. Older NATO members from Germany, Italy, Turkey, Norway, the United States and Portugal, and new NATO members Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, sent their defense ministers. The Czech Republic sent its deputy defense minister. The United States and Ukraine were represented up to presidential level.

The next high-level meeting on Ukraine will take place in Poland in 2004 confirming again that Poland will lobby Ukraine's interests inside both NATO and the EU.

Russia and Ukraine: Different views of NATO

Ukraine has never seen NATO enlargement as a threat to its security. On the contrary, it was understood as bringing security up to Ukraine's western borders. Russia only reduced its view of NATO as a threat under President Vladimir Putin, allowing a major enlargement to take place in 2002 into the former USSR.

The Russian military (unlike the Ukrainian) remains anti-Western and primarily concerned with regaining Russia's superpower status. It has little interest in the "common values" promoted by the EU and NATO. The Ukrainian military has a better understanding of the link between domestic adherence to "common values" and the success of a country's in integration into Euro-Atlantic structures.

At the heart of this is a different world view in Ukraine and Russia, something that has been recognized by NATO, but not the EU. One has only to compare the recent example of Iraq, where Russia fundamentally disagreed with the United States and joined France, Germany and Belgium in opposition to the United States' "unilateralist" military action. Ukraine was the only CIS state to send troops to the U.S.-led coalition - in the form of a chemical, radiological and bacteriological defense battalion. It has also its air space to NATO for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and then dispatched one of the largest peacekeeping units to post-Saddam Iraq.

Russian officials have commented negatively on Ukraine's open declarations to seek NATO membership. The United States, as the pre-eminent member of NATO, would be forced to take Russia's views into account to some extent. But this would not be to the same extent as by the EU. NATO would be less concerned about Russia's negative reaction to Ukraine's membership in NATO than would the EU about offering membership to Ukraine, but not Russia.

This is even more the case under the more "unilateralist" President George Bush, which is precisely why the NSDC pushed so eagerly to send troops to Iraq. A United States "punish-reward" foreign policy provides Kyiv, and other post-communist states, with an incentive to go along with the United States in Iraq.

The dispatch of Ukrainian peacekeeping troops to Iraq will improve relations with Kyiv, but it will not return them to the high level they achieved during the Clinton era. This would only be possible in the post-Kuchma era.

Other issues important to the United States include improving Ukraine's control on arms exports, democratization and human rights (the NATO-Ukraine Action Plan adopted at the Prague summit has large sections devoted to these issues), the Russian-Ukrainian gas consortium, the Odessa-Brody oil pipeline and cooperation with NATO.

Action plan to NATO membership

Marchuk's appointment as defense minister is linked to Ukraine's fulfillment of the 2002 Action Plan with NATO, which called for the creation of a civilian minister of defense and greater civilian (democratic) control over the military

and other security forces. The fulfillment of this Action Plan is in Ukraine's hands and if accomplished, will lead to NATO membership later in the decade.

This makes it very different from the action plans, which are to be drawn up with the EU in its new Wider Europe initiative. The fulfillment of these action plans with the EU does not lead to EU membership, which is still not being offered to Ukraine or any other CIS state.

NATO's open door policy therefore contrasts with the EU's closed-door policy. There will therefore be less incentive by Ukraine to fulfill its action plans with the EU than with NATO.

The NATO-Ukraine Action Plan drawn up at the 2002 NATO summit (www.nato.int/docu/basicxt/b021122a.htm) and the NATO-Ukraine 2003 Target Plan in the framework of the action plan (www.nato.int/docu/basicxt/b030324e.pdf) outlines not only military objectives. The documents are mainly devoted to non-military objectives. These include ensuring the balance of power between the three branches of power, strengthening democratic and electoral institutions, judicial authority and independence, development and strengthening of civil society, the rule of law, and human rights. Other objectives include ensuring religious freedom and freedom of assembly, completing administrative reform, and fighting corruption and money laundering.

After a highly successful relationship between Ukraine and NATO made possible by NATO's open door policy, the goal of NATO membership is in sight. NATO has clearly placed the responsibility for fulfilling the action plan and moving toward a membership action plan as the precursor for membership.

If the EU were to adopt a similar strategic open-door vision toward Ukraine, the results could also be deeply felt. With a new president and NATO membership the EU will be forced, sooner or later, to change its current ambivalent stand toward Ukraine.

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